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Journal Item

How to cite:

Alvarez, Inma; Beaven, Tita and Comas-Quinn, Anna (2013). Performing languages: an example of integrating open practices in staff development for language teachers. *Journal of e-Learning and Knowledge Society*, 9(1) pp. 85–92.

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Version: Version of Record

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Performing Languages: an example of integrating open practices in staff development for language teachers

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In 2009 the Department of Languages at The Open University, UK, developed LORO (<http://loro.open.ac.uk>), a repository of Open Educational Resources for language teaching and learning aimed at language teaching professionals. Initially populated with over 300 hours of teaching resources for French, Spanish, German, Italian, Welsh, Chinese and English for Academic Purposes, LORO's initial function was to provide an efficient and open way of accessing and sharing resources. Additionally, the integration of LORO into language teachers' workflows is part of the department's strategy for teachers' professional development and a key enabler for increased transparency, collaboration, skills development, and pedagogical reflection and discussion, leading ultimately to the enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning.

This case study describes how the vision of openness facilitated by LORO is being implemented at a practical level through the incorporation of

for citations:

Alvarez I., Beaven T., Comas-Quinn A. (2013), *Performing Languages: an example of integrating open practices in staff development for language teachers*, Journal of e-Learning and Knowledge Society, v.9, n.1, 85-92. ISSN: 1826-6223, e-ISSN: 1971-8829

open practices into teachers' professional development activities. We look at the project Performing Languages (www.performinglanguages.eu), a Grundtvig Partnership project (part of the Lifelong Learning Programme) in which language teachers in the UK work with theatre associations in Spain, France and Italy. Besides the primary objective of exploring the role of drama in the language classroom as a tool for language and culture learning and intercultural communication, this project also intends to develop and publish most project resources (workshop activities, lesson plans, texts and video recordings, for example) as Open Educational Resources. The aim is to share the project experiences as widely as possible to maximise impact and ensure others can benefit from them.

This case study looks at how the project has been designed so that collaborative writing, open sharing and peer review of the resources produced by participating language teachers are fully embedded in the project activities. We look at the strategies and tools that enable us to achieve these objectives in a distance context, and the resources that have been created and published by participants as a direct result of the project. Drawing on data from feedback questionnaires and a debriefing session with participants, we examine how teachers' increased awareness of the benefits of sharing and collaboration has resulted in changes in practice, both in relation to openness and pedagogical approach.

1 Open Educational Resources (OER) and Open Educational Practices (OEP) at the Open University

The Open University, UK, is a leading institution in providing and researching open content (OpenLearn <http://www.open.ac.uk/openlearn/>, OLNet www.olnet.org), and also in adopting open source software solutions (Moodle, Eprints). In 2009, LORO (Languages Open Resources Online, <http://loro.open.ac.uk>) was the result of a project funded by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) and the Open University to create a repository where the online teaching resources used by teachers at the Department of Languages could be stored and shared openly (Comas-Quinn *et al.*, 2011). Its function was closely linked to the efficient delivery of resources to all stakeholders, but also to skills and professional development for language teachers, and the enhancement of teaching quality.

Using LORO to access and share resources is transforming the way in which language teachers at the Open University create materials, because there is more cross-fertilisation of ideas and approaches across languages and levels. This has an impact on learners in that they will be exposed to a richer and wider variety of experiences as teachers draw their inspiration from a larger pool of resources.

There is no doubt that LORO has effected a change in the practice of language teachers at the Open University. In this distance learning context there are limited opportunities for teachers to discuss their practice with colleagues, so exposure to the different pedagogies embodied in the open resources available in LORO is already prompting experimentation, collaboration and discussion.

Pedagogical reflection and innovation is being achieved as tutors become aware of the practice of colleagues and are able to try out different methods, resources and approaches.

The provision of OER through LORO was viewed as the start of a fundamental change towards open practice. Openness, sharing, transparency, discussion, etc. are the long-term benefits of OER and OEP, which have been introduced through staff development sessions aimed at helping teachers engage with these concepts. In order to encourage more of our language teachers to familiarise themselves with OER and OEP, we are currently working on embedding these into other professional development activities, such as a project on collaborative writing and peer review, and Performing Languages, a project on the application of drama techniques to language teaching. In both instances, the resources created by teachers are published as OER for the benefit of the entire teaching community.

2 The Performing Languages project

The project *Performing languages* (2011-2013) is a Grundtvig Learning Partnership, that is a small cooperation project funded as part of the Lifelong Learning Programme to enable organizations working in the field of adult education to work together to exchange experiences, practices and methods by organizing visits (“mobilities”) in which learners and their trainers from different European organizations can take part in joint activities.

Performing Languages was set up to explore the intersection between performing arts (drama, poetry in performance, etc), language learning, intercultural understanding and European identity, as we believe that promoting links between theatre and language learning activities is a powerful way to explore intercultural and identity issues.

The project brings together amateur theatre groups (and their trainers), and language teachers and trainers from different European countries. It aims to enable participants to gain a better understanding of drama as a tool for language and culture learning and intercultural communication.

The project partners are the Department of Languages at the Open University in the UK, and three theater organizations, Kewenn Entr’ Actes in Brittany, France, Sala Malasaña in Madrid, Spain, and Associazione Fiumana in Ferrara, Italy. Participants from the Department of Languages (other than the organizers) are part-time language teachers who are, at the same time, language learners, so that when they participate in the mobilities they take part in drama activities in a foreign language they are learning or have learnt in the past. This ensures that their experience in the use of drama in the classroom is from the point of view of the language learner rather than their customary one as language teacher.

Participants from the other three partner associations are adults involved in amateur dramatics, and their trainers, who are sometimes professional actors or volunteers; although they are not necessarily language learners, many speak other languages, or have used the opportunity of taking part in the project to learn new languages or brush up their language skills.

Through the mobilities, participants are involved in joint drama and language activities with people from other countries and cultures; they are not necessarily all fluent speakers of a common language, or familiar with each other's cultural backgrounds, so we have adopted an approach that welcomes polyglot dialogue, where each participant can use whichever language they use (including their own) at any time.

3 The role of OER and OEP in the Performing Languages project

The partnership is also a collaborative platform for exploring the role of Open Educational Resources (OER) in drama, language and intercultural education. OER are resources released under an open license (often a Creative Commons license) so that they can be reused and adapted by anyone, translated into other languages and tailored to new learning contexts or national/regional settings. The philosophy that underpins this project and our approach to knowledge sharing and dissemination of the project outputs is inspired by *“the simple and powerful idea that the world's knowledge is a public good, and that technology in general and the World Wide Web in particular provide an extraordinary opportunity for everyone to share, use and reuse it”* (Smith & Casserly, 2006). Although the primary aim of the learning partnership is not to produce materials but to share experiences and develop common understandings, the resources we are producing for our project (such as workshop activities, lesson plans, texts and video recordings) are released as open resources; part of the motivation is that we want to ensure that the experiences and ideas from this project can be either replicated by others as such, or adapted to their specific context and needs, thus increasing the impact of the project; partly, this approach also stems from our belief that publicly funded projects such as these should release their outputs under Creative Commons licenses whenever possible, rather than being subject to restrictive copyright regulations that limit the ability of others to use the resources produced.

At the same time, we want to explore Open Educational Practices, in particular with the participating language teachers at the Open University. Open Educational Practices, or OEP have been defined as collaborative practices *“in which resources are shared by making them openly available, and pedagogical practices are employed which rely on social interaction, knowledge creation, peer learning and shared learning practices”* (OPAL, 2011a: p. 4) with *“the*

intent to improve quality and innovate education” (OPAL, 2011b: p. 4). The project also aims to raise awareness of Open Educational Practices amongst our community of teachers.

4 Embedding OER and OEP into project activities

This section focuses on the specific mobility which took place in October 2011. A group of eight language teachers from the Open University, with two trainers and two external observers attended a five day visit hosted by Kewenn Entr’actes in Brittany, France. The language teachers had not necessarily done any drama before, and the visit consisted of a series of daily drama workshops with local participants, who were all members of the drama group, but did not necessarily speak any foreign languages. The drama workshops took place in the morning and in the evening. In the afternoons, a number of workshops were organised for the language teachers to explore issues around using and producing OER, and to engage in some collaborative writing of OER based on adapting to the language classroom the drama activities they had been involved in.

Language teachers at the Open University work at a distance, and have few opportunities to engage in face-to-face staff development activities or to interact with each other face-to-face, so we were keen to maximize these opportunities during the project. For this reason, we framed the workshops around the concept of peer observation of teaching, something which language teachers are familiar with as it is used as a performance management tool by their line managers. However, peer observation of teaching (POT) can also be used as a *“collaborative, developmental activity in which professionals offer mutual support by observing each other teach; explaining and discussing what was observed; sharing ideas about teaching; gathering student feedback on teaching effectiveness; reflecting on understandings, feelings, actions and feedback and trying out new ideas”* (Bell, 2005, quoted in Bell & Mladenovic, 2008).

Although POT is often used in face to face teaching, some have argued that, in the context of blended taching and learning, it should be extended to cover other aspects of teaching, such as curriculum design, materials production, online teaching and learner support (Hatzipanagos & Lygo-Baker, 2006; Bennett & Barp, 2008; Swinglehurst *et al.*, 2008). In the context of our work with LORO and OER in general, we are keen to develop ways to extend the concept of peer observation to teaching materials and OER, by promoting collaborative writing and peer review of OER.

During our visit, we organized four teachers' workshops as follows:

- **Workshop 1:** introduction and context of the project, including peer observation and peer review, and discussion of using and reusing OER (with the help of Chris Pegler's Reusable Card Game (http://oriole-project.blogspot.com/p/shop_16.html))
- **Workshop 2:** creative writing workshop with the partners' leading trainer.
- **Workshop 3:** collaborating and microteaching: a discussion of collaboration vs working on your own, using a photo activity to generate discussion (activity description, photo resources and example of use with participants available from <http://www.performinglanguages.eu/project-resources-and-documents.html>), followed by a collaborative writing activity in groups, where participants designed and microtaught an activity that incorporated drama techniques.
- **Workshop 4:** Brainstorming activity where teachers reviewed the drama techniques and activities covered so far, and discussed ways in which these could be adapted for use in the language classroom
- **Workshop 5:** Writing activity, and peer review. Teachers started writing an activity applying a drama technique to the language classroom, and then read somebody else's work in progress and gave feedback. Some worked in groups and others chose to work alone.

5 Evidence of professional development and change in practice

Participants in the French visit met up online for a debriefing session two weeks after their return to the UK. This was an opportunity to share their reflections on the visit, and to discuss to what extent they had incorporated their experiences into their teaching. Leading up to this debriefing session participants had continued to work on the resources they created in France and had circulated them to colleagues for comments. Some of the participants had also tried the activities with their students, and fed back to colleagues about how these activities had been received, and what modifications they had tried out to improve them. The finished activities were then published in LORO as OER. See for example: <http://loro.open.ac.uk/2752/> or search LORO using the tag Performing Languages for more examples.

Part of the discussion during the debriefing focussed on how the peer review process could be conducted to be of greatest value to the teacher. One participant felt that some element of peer review was essential as "you are not the best critic of your own work". Participants felt that several rounds of feedback were needed, and that each of these could be done by different people with

a different relationship to the creator of the resource: initially a colleague or trusted person who could provide comments on a first draft; then it was useful to send the activity to someone who had not been involved in the project to ensure that the aims and instructions were clear enough; later on the activity could be published and receive comments from a wider audience. One participant pointed out that feedback from those outside one's immediate context could be very valuable, but that it would be desirable to be able to engage in a dialogue with those who comment on your work to clarify the context and aims if necessary. As a result of this, LORO has now been modified so that creators receive an alert when somebody comments on the resources they have published, giving them an opportunity to reply to that comment through an in-built emailing facility.

As a result of this experience some of the participants have become more engaged with OER and LORO. One comments that she now thinks about "creating activities to share". Another participant mentions the importance of cascading the experience to others, and the role that publishing resources openly can play in this effort. Several are using activities developed as a result of the workshop in staff development activities for fellow language teachers.

Another immediate benefit was the engagement in pedagogical discussions around the resources, and the reflections and insights that teachers gained from these. Teachers mentioned how they had tried new things, either based on the drama work they had experienced or on the resources created by colleagues.

Conclusion

We believe there are clear benefits in producing outputs from publicly-funded projects such as those funded as part of the Lifelong Learning programme as OER, as this encourages the use and reuse of outputs by others. We would also argue that engaging in Open Educational Practices, such as collaborative writing, peer reviewing of teaching materials, and the adoption and adaptation of OER for one's own teaching contexts enhances collaboration, experimentation and innovation, and exposure to different pedagogical approaches. However, we acknowledge that changing teacher practices and encouraging them to engage with OER and OEP is not an easy or swift endeavour, although the long-term benefits are undoubtedly worth the effort.

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